

Opinion

Editorial: DNR needs to be a more transparent state agency

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Spring is here and for many Oakland County residents, that means the beginning of the boating season.

But as in other areas, the economy is leaving its mark on this aspect of life, too. Consequently, local lakefront communities are scrambling for ways to pay for marine patrols that the Oakland County Sheriff's Office used to provide for free.

Two pieces of legislation currently being drafted by Rep. Eileen Kowall, R-White Lake Township, are part of the effort to find the money for these patrols.

The legislation is not finished yet, but Kowall's office is working with the Oakland County Sheriff's Office on the bills.

At this point, there likely will be two bills. One covers the formula for the distribution of boater registration fees. It will include language that would allow the Department of Natural Resources or the local sheriff's office to charge a nominal fee for boater safety classes. Currently, state law prohibits the DNR from charging a fee, although on its Web site it promotes two firms that do charge fees. Classes on the county level also must be provided free of charge.

The fee would be to only cover the cost of the classes. It makes sense, especially if some people are paying for them already, that money might as well go toward helping keep the lakes safe by deferring some of the sheriff's office costs.

A second bill would call for more transparency by the DNR in reference to the formula for distributing boating registration fees. The DNR would be required to annually post on its Web site the formula used to determine the amount of state aid and the amount of the water craft registration fees collected by each county.

This type of openness is only reasonable from a public agency. However, there is a second motive.

Oakland County officials believe that they don't receive their fair share of the state funds.

The state's Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act sets aside 49 percent of the revenues from water craft registration fees for marine law enforcement and education. The Oakland County Sheriff's Office received about \$240,000 from that fund in 2008.

Officials question if there is any formula used because it appears the DNR decides how to allocate the money indiscriminately.

Kowall notes the county gets back only about 25 cents on the dollar on boat registrations. She also says it's been impossible to get accurate information about how many boats are registered in the county. Obviously, improved transparency is necessary.

She's hoping her bills, which will require a budget amendment, will be approved in time for this summer's busy season. That would be prudent.

Proper funding of the marine patrols is literally a matter of life and death. As Kowall noted in a previous news story, drownings have decreased in the county thanks to the patrols.

Kowall's bills hopefully will rectify, at least a bit, the funding discrepancy not just for Oakland County, but for all marine divisions in the state. Equally important, it would require the DNR, a taxpayer supported state agency, to be more open in its operation, which also is only right.

There should be no reason why this legislation doesn't get passed quickly once it's introduced.

Good Morning

People need to take the safety classes first, then put their boats in the water.

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